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Chapter 10 - The Path to Present-Day Libraries

Julia Grabhorn

Western Oregon University, jgrabhorn13@wou.edu

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The Path to Present-Day Libraries

- Julia Grabhorn -

Since the time of monastic libraries, libraries have become much more of a public place. In the centuries that the monastic libraries were a part of, libraries were not a place for just anyone. Monastic libraries were almost entirely reserved for scholarly purposes, only being utilized by monks and other religious officials. Over the years, libraries started to become more and more of a widespread concept. However, they continued to stay out of public reach for some time. In the span between the first religious libraries and the rise of publicly accessible libraries, libraries were typically held in the private homes of wealthy individuals. For a large part of literature's history, reading and owning books was a sign of power and stature for the wealthy. Because of this, the lower classes were left out of literacy almost entirely. This imbalance of literacy didn't begin to even out until the last part of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. At this point in time public literacy was being vigorously integrated into society through the use of libraries. There are some major stepping stones in the time between monastic libraries and the emergence of what we think of as public libraries today that make up the overall path that leads to present-day libraries. This chapter will outline the more recent of these stepping stones that began to shape this path in the 19th century.

The Beginnings of 19th Century Book Distribution

At the beginning of the 19th century, literacy was not at all what it is today. In 1820 (the earliest recorded year), the world literacy rate sat only at 12%. This is very different than the worldwide literacy rate of 83% in 2010 (the most recent recorded year), which doesn't even compare to the incredibly high literacy rates of today's well-developed industrialist countries with rates

between 99% and 100%¹. This information has me asking myself, what led to such a vast rise in literacy in that 190 year span?

Though the answer to that question has many contributing factors, one vital aspect that I want to focus on is access to literature. Without the increase of access to literature in the 19th century, literacy rates might have taken a lot longer to reach where they are today. But with the major advancement of literature that occurred by the end of the 19th century, most large industrialized cities had achieved mass literacy.

This wasn't something that happened overnight as soon as the 18th century ended; it took some time before the book business really began to boom. In the early years of the 19th century, the dissemination of literature had changed little from that of the 18th century. Individual publishing businesses and their few partner booksellers were just about the only way for the public to buy literary works of the time. However, this wasn't a very efficient method of dispersal in the least. Booksellers were required to provide multiple references, as well as evidence of their professional work ethic, before even being considered given a bookselling license². This system stayed in place for the better half of the 19th century. However, after about 1850 the publisher and bookseller began to take on very distinct roles. Where their job titles had marginally overlapped in book sales before, there became a disconnect³. This gap left room for the success of independent bookstores. In the second half of the 1800s, the book selling business took off. Independent bookstores started popping up on street corners left and right. The more populous the city, the more numerous their bookstores were. This made book buying exponentially easier for the public. For the first time ever, the entire population of a city, in theory, had access to the same books².

A worldwide international market for books even began to take shape by the end of the 19th century³.

Though these bookstores ultimately meant more people could get their hands on literary works, prices were still a huge issue for some people. Theoretically, everyone had access to the books in the bookstores more so than they did at the beginning of the century simply because the books were there,

not because they could actually afford to buy them. The middle and lower classes still struggled to find the funds to support buying literature, which kept literature from becoming fully publically accessible.

In order for something to be truly disruptive in nature, it must create widespread accessibility to more people than the previous technology did. Something that solved the issue of accessibility that bookstores were having in the 19th century was libraries. There were multiple different types of libraries during this time period that share similarities with, but are still very different, than the libraries we have grown to know and love in our society today.

Circulating Libraries

One early form of library was called circulating libraries. Though circulating libraries had been around for some time, they didn't become popular until the 19th century when the demand for public access to books really spiked. The big difference between historical circulating libraries and modern day public libraries is cost. Circulating libraries throughout history were ultimately money making businesses for the owners, which meant that the customers were required to pay in order to use them. Circulating libraries offered a very broad collection of books that would be entirely too expensive for any one person to buy on their own, no matter how wealthy they were. For this reason, paying the monthly or annual fee to rent the books from the libraries was a very good deal. Someone could pay a circulating library no more than they would to purchase a handful of books, and be able to check out hundreds of different books over the course of a year⁴.

G. E. PAGE'S,
CIRCULATING LIBRARY
(In connection with Mudies, London)
Long Street, Dursley.

≡ **RULES** ≡

1. Time allowed to Subscribers is limited to 14 Days.
2. Books can be exchanged not more than three times a week.
3. Single Vols. can be had by Non-subscribers :—
Class A—(New Works) 3d. per week or part thereof. 2d. per week Fine if kept beyond 7 days,
Class B—2d. per week or part thereof. 1d. per week Fine if kept beyond 7 days.
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OVER 400 BOOKS TO SELECT FROM
FRESH PARCEL OF BOOKS AT LEAST ONCE A MONTH
Subscribers can have any Books procured at the first available opportunity

TERMS: SUBSCRIPTIONS PAYABLE IN ADVANCE

	3 Months			6 Months			12 Months					
CLASS A	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.			
One Volume		7	0		12	0		1	1	0		
Two Volumes		10	6		18	0		1	11	6		
Four „		14	0		1	4	0		2	2	0	
Six „		1	1	0		1	16	0		3	3	0

N.B.—Two Volumes of Class B can be had in place of One Volume Class A if preferred.

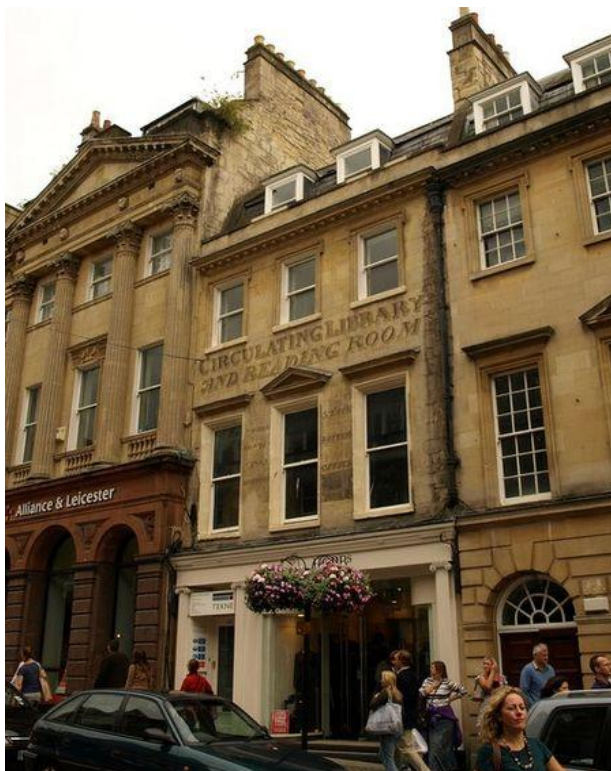
Special Subscription for Class B Books only, exchangeable once a Week, 2/- per Quarter, or 7/6 per Year.

Dursley Circulating Library Rules²

These libraries undoubtedly made borrowing books way more affordable for people rather than buying books outright. Though they made reading habits more reasonably priced for a lot of the upper and middle class people, patrons of the circulating libraries still needed a good amount of money and free time to use what the libraries had to offer. The annual cost to subscribe to even the cheapest circulating libraries was still far above the annual income for the majority of the working class⁵. Because of this, even circulating libraries didn't solve the problem of extensive accessibility completely. The middle class had finally been included in the book business with the blossoming popularity of circulating libraries, but when were the working class people going to get to join the influx of literacy?

Lending Libraries

Later in the 19th century, a second form of the library emerged to help with the inclusion of the working class people. These libraries, called lending libraries, had essentially the same function that we identify with public libraries

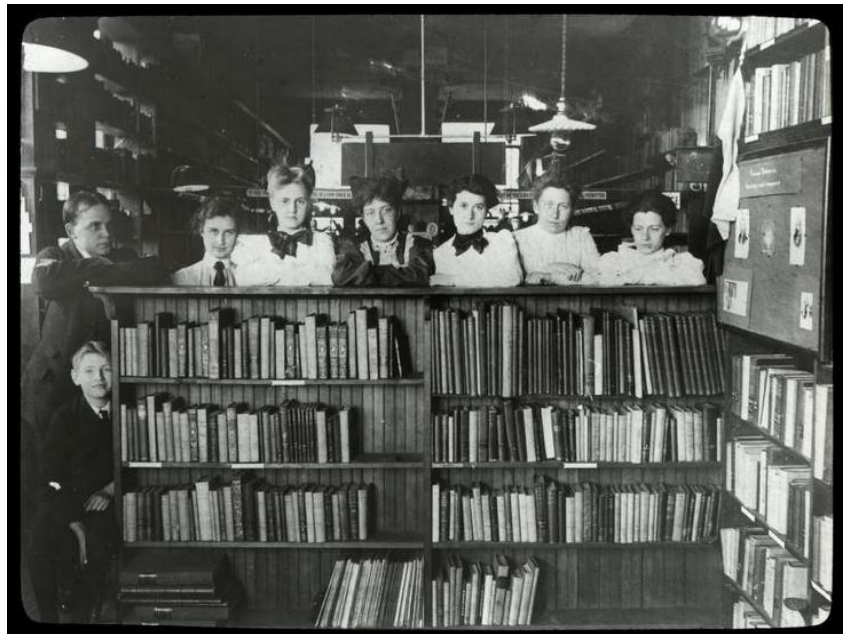


Former Circulating Library³

today: publically accessible free literature. The foundation of free lending libraries stemmed from the passing of the Public Libraries Act in 1850 by the United Kingdom Parliament. With the passing of this act, the local governments in the United Kingdom held the power to establish lending libraries that were free to the public for the first time ever⁶. Local governments of cities with a population greater than 10,000 people were allowed to levy

taxes for the production of public libraries. This one act was the fundamental origin of complete access to information through the free dissemination of books. This widespread access didn't just stop in the UK, it quickly extended all across the globe within a fairly short amount of time. In 1877 the number of European cities that had constructed free lending libraries was around 75, and that number grew to well over 300 by 1900⁷.

With this surge in public access to literature, not only did literacy rates go up in the already common book audiences of upper and middle class men, but new audiences also formed. Because literature was more available and the work days were shorter, leaving more leisure time, a wider variety of people were left with the time and means to read. These audiences included not only the working class men, but also women and children. Before the onset of public libraries, women, children, and workers had never had the chance to indulge in literature, at least not often. This revolutionized society as a whole, bringing class structure into question. For the first time ever a person from any economical class, any social standing, any age or any gender, could walk into any public library and



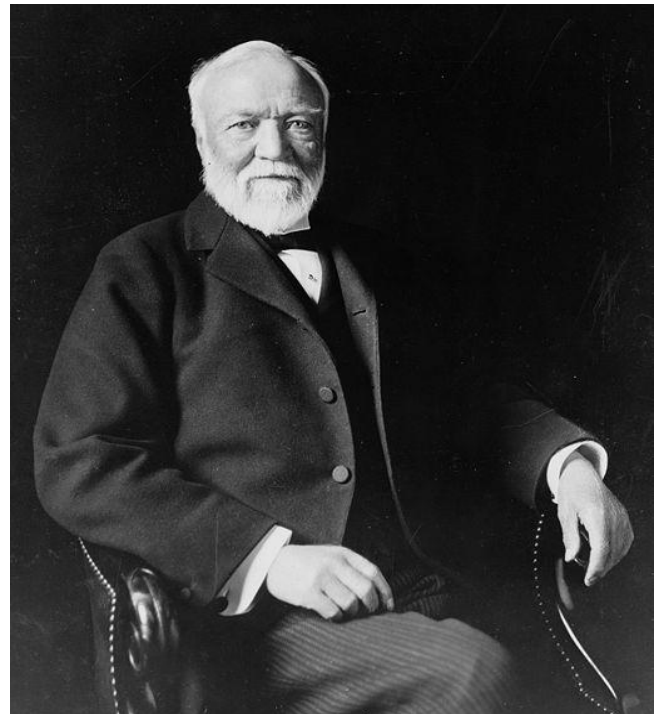
19th century Webster library staff⁴

else. This brought into question the aspects of social structures at that time, challenging the way things worked in the past and forcing people to build bridges between the social classes⁸. In this way, the creation of public libraries didn't only affect the literacy of the public, but also the way people viewed and acted within their society.

All of these public libraries that started to spring up around the world didn't come without expenses however. The majority of the expenses that presented themselves within the construction of public libraries were gained through the levying of public taxes. So, in a sense, these public libraries weren't truly and wholly free to the public. However, the way taxes were set up still made it affordable for the working class citizens to use the libraries unlike it had been in the past. Another way that cities received the funds necessary to build public libraries for their populations was by private donations. Many wealthy people contributed to the production of public libraries in different circumstances.

The Development of Carnegie Libraries

One extremely well-known example of a private library donor is Andrew Carnegie. Born in 1835, Carnegie spent his younger years growing up in the working class of Dunfermline, Scotland. His father was a small businessman weaver who had helped found a subscription library for tradesman use. After attending only three years of school from ages 8 to 11, Carnegie and his family were forced to move to Allegheny, Pennsylvania when his dad lost his job in the textile industry. After the move Carnegie was sent to work in the textile industry at just age 12 to help the family through hard times. His educational inquiry never ceased however, and began to be fulfilled when he became a messenger boy for the local telegraph company. Through this messenger work, he was able to become acquainted with Colonel James Anderson, a wealthy man with a large personal library that he



Andrew Carnegie: American businessman and philanthropist⁵

opened up to working young men on Saturdays so they could borrow books that they couldn't afford to read otherwise. When Col. Anderson's representatives tried to persuade him to turn away from this library use, Carnegie defended the rights of the working boys by writing to the *Pittsburg Dispatch*. After writing this letter, he determined that if he ever happened upon any amount of wealth he would create similar opportunities for young working men that deserved access to information just as everyone else did⁹.

While working his messenger job, Carnegie taught himself the trade of telegraphing. He soon left that job to become the personal telegrapher and assistant to the superintendent of the Pennsylvania Railroad's western division. This was an important step that later led to him becoming the superintendent of the Pennsylvania Railroad's Pittsburg division. While earning his modest salaries through the railway, Carnegie invested a substantial amount of his earnings in locomotives, oil, iron and steel businesses. With the accumulation of prosperity through the success of those businesses, Carnegie left the railroad and founded the Keystone Bridge Company in 1865¹⁰. By the 1890s he had opened his own steel plant, Carnegie Steel Company, and had previously bought out his rival steel company, Homestead Steel Works. In 1900, Carnegie continued to expand his business horizons by using some of his wealth to establish the Carnegie Technical Schools for the sons of local steel mill workers to attend in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. In 1901 Carnegie sold Carnegie Steel Company to J.P. Morgan for \$480 million, officially making him the world's richest man alive⁹.

**Carnegie
Technical
Schools are still
around today as
part of a private
engineering
school called
Carnegie
Institute of
Technology¹⁰.**

Andrew Carnegie accomplished many things with this enormous wealth throughout his lifetime, but one of the biggest and most important of his achievements was the establishment of the Carnegie Libraries. Though the production of his line of libraries began before he became a multimillionaire, this added wealth only expedited the process. The first of Carnegie's libraries opened in 1883 in his birthplace of Dunfermline, Scotland. Following this, he began to finance the building of libraries in and around Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.

He started with these areas that held significant meaning in his life, but eventually broadened the span of his impact by establishing libraries all over the English speaking world¹⁰. Between the years of 1883 and 1919, Carnegie had created 2,509 free public libraries in various countries. These countries included the US, the UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Serbia, the Caribbean, Mauritius, Malaysia, and Fiji. In 1919, 3,500 public libraries existed



Carnegie Library in Dallas, Oregon⁶

in the United States and 1,789 (over half!) of them were financially established by Andrew Carnegie. Carnegie had established so many libraries that he began to be known as the great patron of libraries worldwide by the end of his lifetime, and still today¹¹.

Throughout Carnegie's life, he consistently shared his passions for knowledge with the world. Even as a poor working boy, he dedicated his wishful wealth to the cause that he felt so strongly about. He wholeheartedly believed that those with prosperity should live modestly and use their excess funds to benefit the common people who didn't have enough funds to live without worry. He also stated in one of his essays that a library was one of the best gifts that someone could give to the public because they encourage personal improvement of all people. By the end of his lifetime, he had donated nearly \$350 million (almost 90% of his fortune) to various charities, most of which were public libraries. Carnegie's devotion to the public's access to knowledge was a revolution for literacy worldwide. From the opening of his first library in 1883, to the time of Carnegie's death in 1919, the worldwide literacy rate had risen 13%¹². Even though Carnegie only dealt with a small

portion of the world as a whole, he started something that would continue to live on even after he passed. Since his time, widespread public access to literature has become a cultural norm in almost all parts of the world.

Present-Day Public Libraries

Libraries today are irrefutably much different than they were before the 19th century. They are a place where anyone can access information through books, quite the opposite of 18th century libraries. Though they can be used to find scholarly articles and scientific information, they are mostly used for entertainment purposes. The centuries-long move to publicly accessible literature has changed the intent of book audiences worldwide. Entertainment has increasingly become the goal of book audiences, especially now that fiction books are readily available and people have over double the amount of free time than the working class did in the 18th century¹³.

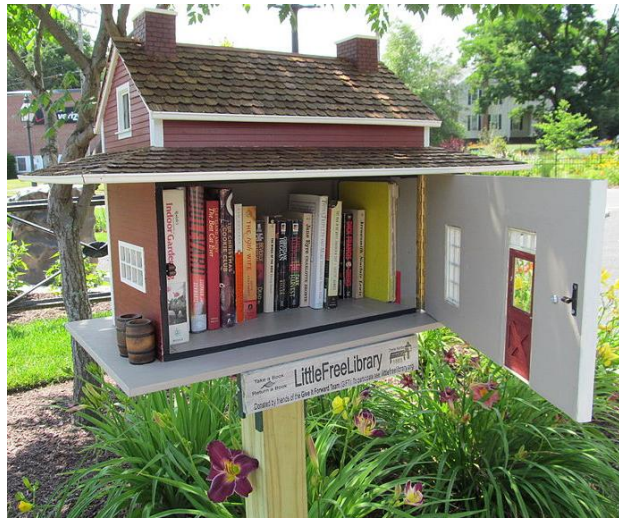
This shift in the public’s motivation to read has in turn shifted the architecture of public libraries. Even with the saying “don’t judge a book by its cover,” people are judging everyday things by their appearance left and right in our society, libraries included. Modern libraries attempt to invoke certain feelings and emotions in the people who use them, usually along the lines of comfort and sincerity. In order to portray these things, libraries are built with them in mind. Like



Kansas City Public Library⁷

designing a book cover that will intrigue people to open it, libraries are being built in ways that make people want to go inside and look around.

Targeting lovers of literature in this way is not just being attempted by public libraries, but also with bookstores and small privately owned libraries. And when I say ‘small,’ I mean tiny. Little Free Libraries of all different designs are starting to pop up in cities all around the globe. These tiny libraries are usually about the size of a birdhouse that the owner fills with books of their choice that are up for grabs to the public. People can borrow one and bring it back or take one and leave another, whatever suits their needs. This is just one way that people are starting to aim their literature collections at different groups of people rather than just the public as a whole¹³. You can see it everywhere from comic book stores to hole in the wall second hand book stores. It has started to become more and more about catering to what people want rather than giving a select few the privilege to view whatever is available.



Little Free Library-Easthampton, Massachusetts⁸

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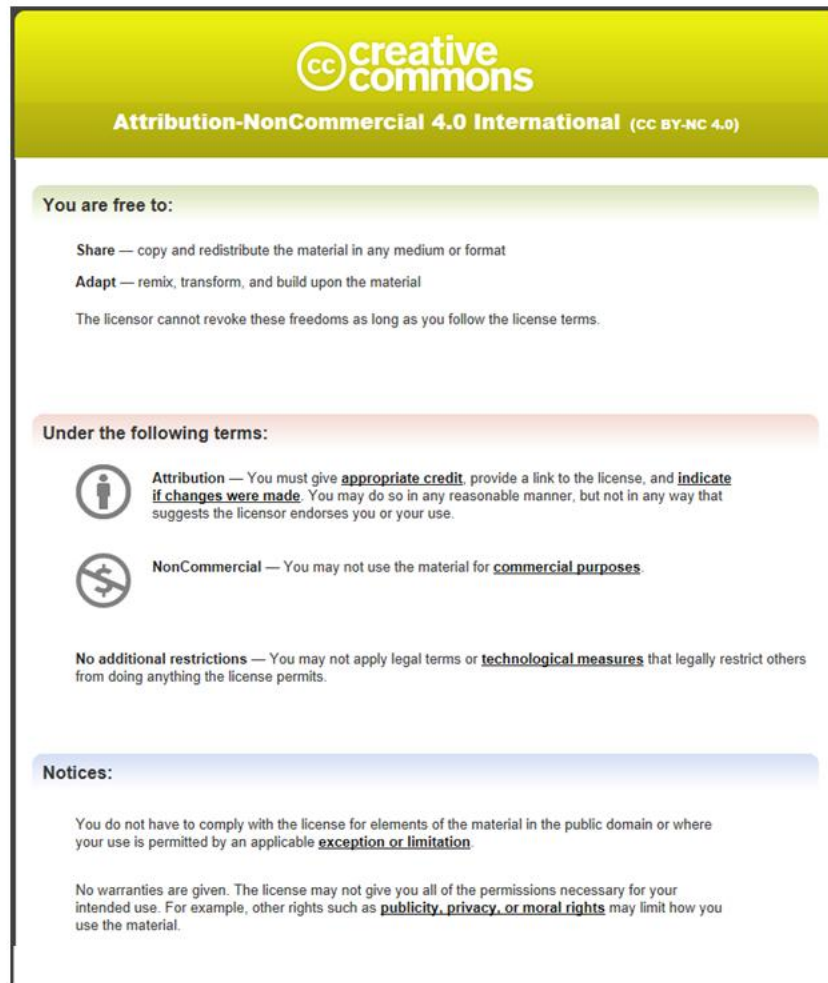
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